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ABSTRACT

This paper is a case study about the role of evaluation and its effect on a foster care program's adoption services. It presents examples of the dilemmas often faced by the evaluator who must identify problems and design action plans to correct program deficiencies. HeartShare Human Services of New York is an 80-year-old nonprofit agency that provides foster care among its other services. The program is committed to developing permanency plans, including arranging adoption when possible. The Child Welfare Administration (CWA) of New York (New York) has evaluated the program's performance over time. In 1991 CWA developed a new system for assessing performance that weighted milestones in the adoption process and established a target of completing at least 50% of adoptions within 27 months. The inability of the program to meet the new goals and changes to the adoption assessment system resulted in several organizational changes to improve performance and ensure that information flowed more smoothly within the agency. Program evaluation, as the case study illustrates, resulted in improved performance in this social services program. (SLD)

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USING PROGRAM EVALUATION TO AFFECT POSITIVE CHANGE IN PROGRAM PERFORMANCE

PREPARED BY

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FOR THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY FOR APPLIED SOCIOLOGY IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI ON OCTOBER 16TH, 1993

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USING PROGRAM EVALUATION TO AFFECT POSITIVE CHANGE IN PROGRAM PERFORMANCE

INTRODUCTION

Over the pasty twenty years, program evaluation has come under increasing scrutiny for its general usefulness in affecting positive change in program performance. Several theorists, such as Patton and White, have begun to question the overall usefulness of program evaluation because it fails to meet management expectations or affect program performance.

This paper is a case study about the role of evaluation and its affect on a Foster Care Program's Adoption Services. It presents an example of dilemmas often faced by the evaluator whose task is to identify problems and design action plans that will correct program deficiencies. Once the evaluator accomplishes both tasks, management assumes it will improve program performance.

In presenting this study, the author will provide a historical context that will explain systematic issues affecting the role of an internal evaluator. The second part will focus on various methods employed to gather information and systems developed to affect program performance. The final section will summarize issues that affected decisions made during the course of the project and how it strengthened the role of evaluation in an organizational setting.

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A DIOCESAN AGENCY PROVIDING NON-SECTARIAN CARE TO PEOPLE IN NEED SINCE 1914

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

HeartShare Human Services of New York is an eighty year old voluntary non-profit agency that provides services in the areas of aids case management, developmental disabilities, foster care and preventive services. The agency has two primary funding sources. New York City's Child Welfare Administration funds our foster care and preventive services while New York State's Department of Social Services and Office of Mental Retardation and Disabilities funds our aids case management and developmental disabilities programs.

The Foster Care Program, which is a major component of the HeartShare Service Delivery System, has two major purposes. First, its primary focus is to provide temporary placement for children whose parents are experiencing a crisis or because of an abuse or neglect allegation with the ultimate goal of returning the child home. Second, if it is determined the child will not return home, the program will either change the discharge plan to adoption or independent living. The fundamental goal of the program is to do what is in the best interest of the child by providing permanency planning. More specifically, the program is committed to identifying the problem that brought the child into care; developing a permanency plan that will determine the appropriate placement; and discharging the child out of the foster care system within 18 or 24 months dependent on child's age.

Since CWA has primary responsibility for monitoring program performance and setting standards for accountability purposes, HeartShare has maintained an internal evaluation system. This internal evaluation component resides in the Management Information Services Department. One of the unit's functions include program evaluation and quality assurance activities in the Foster Care Program. The Director reports to the Associate Executive Director for Support Services who in turn reports directly to the Executive Director. Although the MIS Director reports to the Associate Executive Director for Support Services, he has access to the Executive Director as well as the Associate Executive Director for Children and Families Services who oversees the Foster Care Program. Overall, the Director is authorized to conduct ongoing evaluation and quality assurance activities in the Foster

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Care Program to ensure program compliance with regulatory standards and providing quality service to its' client population.

As previously stated, the Child Welfare Administration is responsible for funding the foster care program; setting regulatory standards; and monitoring program performance. Prior to 1991, CWA had a program assessment unit for collecting data; making on-site visits; analyzing results and writing reports to ensure program compliance. The primary way CWA monitored adoption performance was twofold. First, they would utilize information from the state computerized case management system. This system contained information on all movements regarding children in care. Second, they would generate reports showing agency success and failure rates in meeting target dates. Ultimately, these reports assessed agency performance in meeting system standards.

In determining agency performance, CWA utilized several milestones. They were:

(1) setting adoption as a goal within 18 months of initial placement date; (2) filing a petition with the court to terminate parental rights within four months of goal approval date; (3) freeing the child within eight months of petition filing date; (4) placing a child in an adoptive home within four months of freed date; (5) finalizing adoption within six months of placement date if child was being adopted by his or her foster parent or twelve months if a child was placed in a pre adoptive home; and (6) completing the entire adoption process within 27 months of original goal set date.

When assessing scores, milestones were divided into several variables. There was one for setting goal. The second grouped petition filing, freeing, placing and finalization milestones into another variable known as adoption milestones. The third variable was completing adoptions within 27 months. If the agency failed to take no action to meet target dates for petition filing, freeing, placing and finalizing, they were grouped into another variable known as adoption milestone exceptions.

In determining scores, CWA used two review periods. They were January to June and July to December. Pass or failure was determined by target dates. For most variables, pass or failure was determined by initial target date and adoption milestone exceptions were assessed by agencies ability to complete tasks within a six month review period after missing original target dates.

Since program assessment was driven by a computerized case management system, it was very important to monitor information flow to ensure accuracy of data entry on each child's movement in the state computer and having an internal case management system that would advise workers of actions required to meet target dates for each adoption milestone.

From the period 1989 to 1991, MIS would generate reports on all milestones showing what had to be done in order to be in compliance. Further, MIS prepared quarterly reports showing how well the program was meeting target dates by time period and site. As a result of these reports, Directors knew how well the program was doing for each milestone and which sites were more efficient at meeting standards. During this time, Directors felt it was valuable to have these reports. However, it was decided that Directors would act on deficiencies as opposed to having the evaluator play a pro active role in correcting problem areas.

Over the course of time, reports showed there were major problems in meeting filing dates and freeing children. Further, there were ongoing inconsistencies between information that was in the internal and state case management system.

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In order to correct the later issue, the MIS Director met with the Adoption Director to develop a system for reconciling discrepancies. As a result of the discussion, a system was put in place but no action was taken to utilize the system. In general, neither the Adoption Director nor her staff wanted to deal with the issue. As a result, there was no effort made to correct the problem.

In 1991, CWA developed a new system for assessing performance. Milestones were given weighted scores and agencies were asked to complete at least 50% of all adoptions that were coming up to the 27 month period or were past the 27 month target date. As a result, the agency was under increasing pressure to improve total numbers since the program finalized only 26 adoptions for the 90/91 fiscal year. Further, CWA developed a scoring mechanism that was now based on a weighted score, system standard and changes in milestone target dates for freeing children. The milestones, that were considered in assessing adoption performance, were as follows:

(1) setting adoption as a goal within 18 months; (2) filing a petition within four months of goal set date; (3) freeing child within one year of goal set date; (4) placing child within four months of free date; (5) achieving adoption within 27 months of goal set date; and (6) total number of adoptions reaching 27 month or past 27 month.

As for the scoring system, you received up to 4 points for finalizing at least fifty percent of all adoptions due for the fiscal period; 1.5 for petition filing and placement dates since the agency had total control over these milestones; while the remaining milestones had a weighed score of 1.0 each. These scores were totaled and a figure was arrived at that determined whether you were satisfactory, needs improvement or unsatisfactory.
In addition, numbers were cumulative in calculating system standards and agency scores. Therefore, if you were an agency that failed to complete a significant number of milestone dates, it was reflected in your score. Therefore, it became increasingly important to clear up past due milestone dates.

EVALUATION SYSTEM

As a result of changes to CWA's adoption assessment system and program's inability to improve adoption performance, the Executive Director instituted several organizational changes. First, the MIS Director was given the adoption legal unit in order to clear up discrepancies in milestone information that existed between the state and internal system. Second, the MIS Director was asked to work closely with the program's administrative staff in order to monitor performance and ensure information flowed more smoothly between agency workers and attorneys responsible for terminating rights and finalizing adoptions.

In order to improve performance, several systems were implemented immediately.

First, MIS personal was given responsibility for imputing all information into both the state and internal information systems. Second, the compliance coordinator was given the task to conduct ongoing audits to ensure accuracy of data input in both systems. This system included a periodic review of adoption cases to ensure there were no discrepancies between both systems and if there were to work closely with the Assistant QA Director, Program and CWA staff to correct problem immediately.

Second, the Assistant Director for Quality Assurance worked closely with the Adoption Coordinator to identify adoption cases that would be completed by the end of the fiscal year. Once these cases were identified, a computer data base showing information currently in file and outstanding documents that were needed for completing adoptions was developed, with reports being sent to administrative staff on a bi-weekly and currently monthly schedule. In these reports, each case listed information needed to complete finalization and identified individuals responsible for completing tasks. If tasks were not completed, reasons were requested and systems were identified to expedite paperwork.

Third, the Assistant Director for Quality Assurance has weekly meetings with agency attorney to review cases and identify tasks necessary to expedite cases. In addition, monthly meetings were held with program and legal staff to review progress of cases and determine tasks necessary for expediting finalizations.

Fourth, quarterly reports were prepared for administrative staff and monthly meetings were held to review results and develop action plans to correct deficiencies.

Fifth, MIS staff developed close working relationships with attorneys hired by families to finalize adoptions and court clerks responsible for calendaring cases in order to enlist their support in expediting cases through the system.

As a result of these changes, the agency improved their petition filing performance by 30% and increased their adoption finalizations from 26 for fiscal year 90/91 to 106 for fiscal year 92/93.

SUMMARY

This paper provides an overview of how evaluation was used to affect program performance. As a result of this experience, several issues arose that affected decisions made during the course of the project and enhanced the learning process on the appropriate utilization of evaluation to affect program performance.

First, evaluation has to make sense and meet the needs of the end user. When the MIS Director was originally hired by the agency, there was a QA system already in place. For the most part, it consisted of the QA Director reading case records; preparing rebuttal reports to CWA Audits; and copying the previous years action plan to show how the agency would correct program deficiencies. In reviewing the system, the MIS Director came to several conclusions.

(A) The pre reports, that were designed to show directors and supervisors what was coming due for each milestone, were not used properly nor user friendly. As a result, there was a need to develop a case management system that would provide the necessary information by supervisor and worker.

(B) Post reports were for the most part erratic and failed to identify location of system breakdowns. The new system was designed to provide information that highlights program performance by site. By using this process, the agency was able to pinpoint location of system breakdowns and target corrective action plans to that specific area.

(C) In the past, QA prepared reports and program people had primary responsibility to decide how best to utilize results. Now, the system requires ongoing sessions with administrative staff who respond to MIS reports by showing what actions will be taken to resolve deficiencies or explain why there cannot be improvement in performance.

Second, Evaluation is meaningless unless it has the full support of the Executive Staff. Unlike the past, the Executive Director as well as the Associate Executive Director for Children and Families Services gave the MIS Director a great deal of freedom in developing systems for correcting deficiencies. Therefore, the MIS Director has periodic meetings with the Executive Director and/or Associate Executive Director to discuss problems and systems that would be designed to rectify problems.

Third, evaluation relies on meaningful information. In the past, the Adoption Director was responsible for having adoption information imputed into the state system and passing it along to MIS. Since the Adoption Director was not a systems person, the information flow became inadequate which had an impact on the quality of reports generated by MIS. With the new system, MIS has total control over adoption information flow ensuring the quality of data used for developing pre and post reports. Further, it becomes easier to isolate breakdowns that may occur within the system.

Fourth, evaluation can only succeed if all individuals have a clear understanding of roles and a willingness to work together to correct deficiencies. In the past, MIS worked in isolation from program and legal staff. The new system encourages ongoing dialogues between MIS and Program staff as well as MIS and Agency Attorneys so everyone has a clear understanding of their roles and actions necessary to complete tasks that will expedite the adoption process.

In conclusion, this case study is an example of one approach for utilizing evaluation to affect program performance. It clearly shows how to use an evaluation system that adapts to the situation; is flexible; user friendly; and meets the needs of the end user. Overall, the system not only had a positive impact on increasing the total number of adoptions but it also helped in strengthening the permanency planning system which led to a total of 262 children either being returned to their parent; adopted; or discharged to independent living in the 92/93 fiscal year. Further, it fostered a positive relationship between MIS and Program staff by helping both groups focus on the primary goal of developing an appropriate permanency plan for each child who came into the program's care.